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## **OPINION COLUMN: 03.05.04**

### **Election Consolidation Bills**

Last year the Michigan Legislature passed a package of bills commonly referred to as the Election Consolidation bills and the Governor signed them into Law. In short, what these bills do is limit the maximum number of election days that can be held each year and specifically limit those days to four dates in February, May, August and November. There is, however, provision for a “floater” or 5<sup>th</sup> date by the schools. The bills also require that all elections be governed by the Michigan Election Code.

Unfortunately, there has been a great deal of misinformation being offered by those who opposed the bills, mainly school administrators and a few clerks who have bought into the school’s arguments. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that the Legislature “did not do its homework” before passing the bills. Nothing could be further from the truth. This package of bills had been a work-in-progress for more than 11 years before passage. During that time, four Legislators who were former clerks (including myself) actively worked on the bills, and from the very beginning clerks’ associations as well as other entities interested in the election process have been at the table.

When the process began with a work group of all parties who had an issue in elections and ballot questions, there were many obstacles that needed to be overcome. Over the years, several of those hurdles were overcome by advances in technology, more specifically the Qualified Voter File and the optical scan voting equipment. Another significant event which made the final passage more feasible was the enactment of Proposal A which reduced the dependency upon millage elections to fund school operating expenses. The “floater” provision finally brought the Michigan Education Association on board.

But the Myths and Misconception continue to circulate, and I’d like to set the record straight as someone who has been involved in the process since day one and also someone who has actually read the bills in their entirety.

Myth #1: Consolidation will never work because school districts cross too many voting jurisdictions. Truth: Clerks will have the opportunity to redraw precinct lines, taking into consideration school district boundaries. While it is true that some may need to utilize “split” precincts for some elections, many clerks must run split precincts today. By utilizing the Qualified Voter File, properly trained clerks will be able to do this with little difficulty. Clerks also have the ability to determine where each precinct votes, creating more options for clerks to combine precincts in such a way that will not increase cost or confusion to the voters.

Myth #2: Costs will go up because more precincts will be required to run school elections. Truth: As mentioned above, Clerks will have the ability to consolidate and draw lines in such a way to minimize any increases. Schools also will pay for full election costs ONLY if they are the only item on the ballot. By combining elections with other regularly-scheduled elections such as the August Primary or November General, schools would only be charged proportionately. Schools actually have an opportunity to greatly REDUCE the cost they are currently incurring by running their own elections.

Myth #3: Bills limit the ability of access to the bond market. Truth: We actually had bond counsel at the table during the work groups and changed the initial proposal of three dates per year at their request to accommodate the bond market. Notice requirements and required preparation under the Election Law make it impossible to hold bond elections more often than once every quarter. Also, passage of a millage does not force one to go to the market immediately.

Myth #4: Small township clerks do not want to be “forced” to run school elections. Truth: There is an opt-out provision in the bills; the County Clerk is ultimately responsible. I offer a word of caution here, one that is also supported by the Michigan Townships Association. Clerks, who abdicate their responsibility under this opt-out provision, risk the danger of adding fuel to the arguments for those who want to abolish township government. Your association hopes you will participate in the process.

Myth #5: The bills eliminate skilled school election coordinators statewide and disenfranchise school election workers. Truth: Many school districts already contract with the local clerks to run elections, and most of the election workers in school elections also work in local elections. While the Secretary of the School Board has technically been the school election coordinator, in many cases a secretary in the school office actually does the work with little or no formal training in election procedures and law.

The arguments against these bills in many cases are merely smoke screens by school administrators who, rightfully so, object to losing the control they have had in running their elections and by clerks who either object to the additional workload or do not have a clear understanding of how to implement the new process. The State Elections Department will provide assistance in the latter, but in many cases clerks have already risen to the occasion and I am sure they, as well as the Clerks Association, will be willing to assist their colleagues if asked.

Let's remember the intent behind the bills was to eliminate some of the confusion and obstacles that have been cited as reasons for low voter participation. While the bills cannot guarantee higher voter turnouts, it is hoped that increases will occur. Voters leaving the state for extended periods of time will now know when to request absentee ballots, and voters will become more aware of when elections occur because there will be consistency.